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ABSTRACT

Parent involvement on a nation-wide basis, as participant advocates in their child's learning, can improve the achievements of the child and the mental health of children, parents, and teachers, and may be a way of reversing the recent trend toward nonlearning and early failure among young children. Schools are not able to make up for a child's deficiencies in experience which evolve from his home life during the preschool years. Three small programs which increased parent involvement are described and the results given: (1) a program of educational games designed to help parents teach age-appropriate concepts to preschoolers; (2) a program of learning games for economically disadvantaged parents to use with their second grade children to increase their reading achievement; and (3) a program in San Francisco in which parents of children threatened with expulsion became active observers and learning helpers in their children's classrooms. It was found that these working programs provided regular interaction between parent and child, evoked greater encouragement and approval from the parent, and increased parental interest in his/her child's abilities and progress. On the basis of these findings a model elementary school program is proposed in which an intermediary teacher teaches parents methods of helping children learn to read. (Author/ED)

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SCHOOL'S TRAINING OF PARENTS TO BE EFFECTIVE TEACHERS OF THEIR OWN AND OTHER NONLEARNING CHILDREN

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The past twenty-five year period has witnessed a trend of seeing the schools alienate themselves from the communities which they serve. Parents have increasingly been willing to leave their child's education completely to the schools, assuming that because education is the prerogative of educators, it is no longer that of the parents or family.

The schools seem to have accepted this responsibility. Since the number of non-learners or low achievers has increased steadily, the schools, with the help of federal funds, have launched a number of remedial and enrichment programs, all of which have been largely ineffectual. Since the correlation between school achievement and socio-economic level has been demonstrated to be high, the national Head Start program was launched nation-wide to help children of families in poverty to get special help in the schools to make up for deficiencies in experiences provided in the home. There is an increasing demand for day care services for working mothers that can, in effect, make up to the child for the attention and care he does not receive from a mother who is primarily concerned with earning a living.

Results from the Head Start program nation-wide indicate that gains from this program are not lasting, except for those children whose mothers have become directly involved in the classroom process. Remedial and enrichment programs for school-age children have been largely ineffective. There is reason to accept the apparent fact that schools are not able to make up to a child for deficiencies in experience which evolve from his home life which occur at preschool ages.

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Seattle Research

An Early Childhood Education Center, a school for children from kindergarten through second grade, was established in Seattle. Its purpose was to use every means possible to ensure that children would achieve the skills required for success in the third grade when most children with learning difficulties failed.

Since a strong emphasis was placed on the importance of learning to read, a variety of programs was considered. Members of a citizens' task force gave high priority to hiring a teacher whose sole job would be to teach parents how to help teach their own children. The teacher would work with parents who came to school and would have a paraprofessional as an assistant who would make home visits to parents who did not come to school and whose children were underachievers. These two positions were funded the following year by the school district and this parent education program was implemented.

To demonstrate the usefulness of utilizing parent help to stimulate learning of underachievers, one of the authors (RB) worked with a group of parents in a study for a doctoral dissertation.

Use of Educational Games:

A Vehicle for Parents Teaching Their Children

This program investigated the effect of helping parents play educational games with their children to enhance the concept development of these kindergarten children. Two intact classrooms were used as experimental and control groups. The control classroom was matched for racial balance and socio-economic level with the experimental class. They were approximately the same in size and in the same geographic area.

Games were used as a means of involving parents in interaction with

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their children. The Boehm Test of Basic Concepts, widely used to test conceptual readiness of children, was used in both classes as a pretest and again as a posttest, and was individually administered. The games used were developed from the concepts tested for in the Boehm Test. Each game was specifically designed to teach a concept. Such simple games as those which follow were utilized.

Mothers of all children in one kindergarten class were invited to participate in this program. They were to help in teaching age-appropriate concepts through the use of games. Games were chosen as a means of involving parents because we believed it to be the easiest way to get parents to relate to their children. The games were presented and demonstrated to the mothers at weekly meetings held in the school. Simple instructions for the use of each game accompanied each demonstration. Parents were encouraged to play each game for fifteen minutes at least once a day for one week.

Home visits were made to those mothers who failed to attend the weekly meetings. Home visits were made with the help of a non-professional who had been trained to demonstrate the games to the mothers and to encourage the participation of the mother in playing the game with the children.

A series of ten games was used. The games were devised to teach specific concepts and were assembled from simple materials at hand.

For example, a game used to teach the meaning of "pair" consisted of six pair of cards having designs colored in the shape of diamonds, circles, triangles, hearts, rectangles and clubs. The game was played by shuffling the cards and laying the cards face down in three rows. The first player turns two cards over. Any matching pair of cards are kept and placed in the player's pile; the other cards are turned back

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face down. The object is to remember where the cards are so that pairs can be obtained. The game ends when all cards have been matched. The winner has the most pairs of cards. Each pair counts as one point.

In discussions around the use of this game, parents are urged to use other examples of pairs with their children, such as shoes, socks, mittens, salt and pepper shakers, as well as to use the same opportunities to teach related concepts such as "alike" or "different."

Another game used was a set of special dominoes. Each domino was made of two bright colored patterns. The concept to be taught was "matching." The patterns had to be matched in order to play a domino. The person who matched the most domino patterns won.

One game designed to teach the concept of "separate" used a string of pop-a-part beads and one die. The object of this game was to separate every bead from every other bead. This may be done by removing from the main segment of beads that number of beads equal to the number on the die at each throw. Players take turns until one player has separated all of his beads.

Discussion around this game brings up ways of teaching related concepts such as "each," "every," and "almost." Thus, <u>each</u> bead, <u>every</u> bead, and "You <u>almost</u> separated all the beads" or "You have <u>almost</u> won" are examples used.

The results of this experiment were that the children in the experimental group, whose mothers were helped to play educational games with them, learned more concepts than the children in the control group whose parents were not involved with them. This result was statistically significant. In addition, a larger percentage of pupils in the experimental group made a greater than average gain. Finally, the low achievers in

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the experimental group, those who knew the fewest concepts, benefitted more from this program than the middle and high achievers in the experimental group and more than all groups in the control classroom. This was also statistically significant.

This study demonstrated that a program which involved mothers of low achieving pupils in kindergarten was effective in increasing concept learning.

Another doctoral study in Seattle's inner city schools investigated the effectiveness of using learning games with economically disadvantaged parents to increase the reading achievement of their second grade children. In this study two classrooms with no significant differences in average reading scores were used and 30 children were randomly selected and assigned to three groups. Experimental and internal control groups were assigned from one classroom. The other classroom was used as an external control group. Individual IQ (Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test) and Form C of the Metropolitan Achievement Test were given to all subjects as pretests. Diagnostic reading tests were administered in order to establish the specific reading needs to be included in the first games. Parents were invited to group meetings held once a week to learn to use each new game for the week and to discuss their reactions and their children's reactions to the previous games. Home visits were made to those parents who did not come to the group meetings. After the eight-week series of game playing, the subjects were tested using other forms of the previous tests. The results showed that children who had played learning games with their mothers achieved scores which resulted in significant improvement in vocabulary, composite reading, and IQ. Thus learning games used by these economically disadvantaged parents increased the reading achievement and IQ scores of their children. It indicates that these games may provide a technique

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useful to the school to involve parents in the learning process of their children.

In addition to these two recent studies in Seattle's inner city area, a considerable number of other studies have reported significant success in increasing school achievement of children as a result of establishing programs to involve parents. There seem to be two essential elements of successful programs; one is that the program have sufficient structure to provide the parents with specific techniques which they could learn to use with their children over a scheduled period of time and the other is that the program provide for home visits to those parents who do not come to school. That is, so-called unreachable parents were mostly gradually reached and involved in working with their children.

San Francisco Program

In a program in San Francisco 18 black parents, whose children in a ghetto school were either failing academically or whose disruptive behavior had brought expulsion notices, were gathered by that school's mental health worker into a group to discuss what they as parents could do. Their first impulse was to complain to the superintendent of schools that their ghetto school had become a dumping ground for inadequate and hostile teachers and an ineffectual, tyrannical principal who would not be tolerated by parents in middle class neighborhoods. After much discussion they agreed that all previous efforts to reach the superintendent and school board had resulted in lame excuses and no action.

After much deliberation and encouragement by the mental health worker they agreed they would have to gather data through regular and systematic classroom observations to convince the board of how poorly their children were being taught.

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To gain entry into the school over the principal's objection these parents forced the community board to confront the superintendent and then a black councilman to put pressure on the superintendent to allow the parents into the school as regular observers. The parent group also put two of their group up for election to the community board on the platform that an alert community board would not have allowed such a damaging school situation to exist or continue at their children's expense.

The first effects of having parents as regular observers in the elementary school classroom were that the teachers valiantly tried to teach better and that the children, aware that a parent in each classroom was watching and recording their behavior and the teacher's, tried to learn more and behave less disruptively. The supposition of poor teaching skills and inability to engage the children or to manage their behavior was effectively documented with many time-sample observations in most of the elementary school classes. The fact that the principal never made an appearance in even the most chaotic classes to help his teachers spoke eloquently of either his lack of concern with the teaching and learning in his school or his incapacity to help his teachers.

After several attempts with the backing of the community board and the black city councilman a hearing before the board occurred. The completeness of the documentation obviously disconcerted the board who could find no way to wriggle out of the situation and ordered the superintendent to change administrators and teaching personnel in the schools.

Once in the school the parents, with the help of the mental health worker, documented the obvious changes in their own and other children in the classroom which their presence seemed to bring about. They were able to obtain agreement from the new principal with these data to continue

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their observations and, additionally, to be available to the teacher to help with specific teaching tasks that the teacher felt they might perform with those children who needed special attention. The teachers, after initial anxiety and distrust, came to value the parents' presence since it reduced disruptive behavior. They came to rely on their assistance in working with individual students and small groups in reading and elementary math. A few of the most talented parents, mostly mothers, became the first teachers' aides hired in that school. Unlike teachers' aides in other schools, having demonstrated their abilities to coach and teach children, they were not given housekeeping or record keeping chores.

Findings from this Study

Parents' presence in the classrooms as learning helpers made it clear to their own children that parents were interested in the child's learning. Perhaps as important, it demonstrated over time that their parents believed they could learn and that they as parents could help them learn. The achievement in reading and writing of these failing or about to be expelled students increased from year to year. Anecdotal records kept by the school mental health worker indicated that both the children and their parents began to feel more competent and effective. Their relationships at home also changed as parents learned new ways of involving themselves with their children and encouraging their learning. The often commented upon apathy of black parents and their children was not seen in this elementary school.

There can be no question that children headed toward academic failure, dropping out of school, and delinquency stayed in school and learned. Parents usually described as angry and unconcerned about their children became their active advocates. Moreover, many of the parents became active in helping other parents to recognize their importance to their

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kids' learning as manifested by their attendance in school and learning to work with their own and other children.

If positive mental health can be measured by positive and active involvement to change their life situations, these parents qualified. They became active not only in the community council but on behalf of their adolescents with the police and juvenile authorities, and more and more became a nucleus for parent involvement in other community activities which affected their children's and their own lives.

In retrospect it is clear that these parents' involvement in the school and in enhancing their own children's learning paid off with an enhanced sense of self-worth and competence of children and parents.

Many of these children became the first volunteer tutors of younger children when they entered junior high school. It seemed to us that having learned the benefits of learning, their altered attitudes toward feeling effective as young people led them to be eager to assist their classmates.

Some Implications of the Program

From these experimental efforts we can project the kind of program which might be helpful to primary school children who presently are doomed to failure in schoool and whose self-images as failures are difficult to alter later in their lives. While we did not evaluate the mental health of parents involved in these programs, it was clear from teachers' and observers' reports that the parents of low achieving children also looked upon themselves as inadequate parents. Our work indicated that just as the lowest achieving children make the greatest academic gains so their parents' attitudes toward themselves and their children show the most marked alterations. Subjectively these parents were more pleased and proud of their children and could talk with teachers about their children more easily.

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A Model Elementary School Program

A school program that attempts to make full use of parent help to increase the school achievement of children would be based on the employment of a teacher with expertise in the teaching of reading or other specific skills. That teacher's job would be to work with parents who come into the school building for the express purpose of helping their child learn. The teacher could work with parents singly or in groups. The teacher would demonstrate to parents methods of helping children learn to read which are appropriate for their age or developmental level and would provide learning materials for the parents' use. She would serve as a liaison with the child's teacher and help identify areas where a child might need special help. The teacher would then provide methods and materials appropriate to the child's learning task to the parent with demonstrations of their use, so the parent would know some ways of providing the help needed. The progress of the child could be carefully monitored by both parent and teacher so that alternate methods of learning might be used if those provided had not been successful. The classroom teacher in this way, simply by identifying the child who needs special help along with providing an assessment of the child's present level, could secure the individualized help that child needed. The parent would be used to provide the individual help. The teacher of parents would serve as the intermediary in order that the classroom teacher not be overburdened by working with parents while managing a total classroom.

The non-professional staff members would work as assistants to the teacher of parents and would make home visits to those parents who did not come to school. These assistants would take learning materials and would demonstrate their use to the parent. These materials would be

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designed by the parents' teacher for a particular child needing to learn a particular task, as prescribed by the classroom teacher. The materials to be used with the child would be left with the parents with instructions and encouragement for their use. The assistants would make regular follow-up visits.

An extension of this program would offer child care services to enable parents of very young children to come to school. For parents needing transportation in order to avail themselves of this program, a volunteer program which involves other parents in the school can be effective, particuarly when parents meet in groups.

Studies make clear that students who learn and are competent are obviously in better mental health than their fellows who fail in school and do not learn the basic skills necessary for employment in a technical society. Similarly we can, with some confidence, hypothesize that parents concerned with their children's learning and who have participated in helping their child learn have better mental health because their concern has actively enhanced their child's learning and thus in our experience enhanced the parent's sense of adequacy and worth as a parent. Such parental participation also reduces at least one aspect of conflict with the child, that of being successful in school.

Some Effects of Parental Participation in their Child's Learning

In the process of playing learning games with their children several phenomena were observed.

First, the game-playing for a specified fifteen minutes a day provided a vehicle for regular interaction in which the parent carried out a specific task which they had already learned with the child.

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Second, in the process of the demonstration of the games parents were encouraged to practice how to overtly express their encouragement and approval to the child. Thus often a new relationship was evolved in which the parent was encouraging and approving of the child's success.

Third, most of the parents of the low achievers did not believe their children could learn. As they worked with their children using games to teach them they usually discovered, to their delight, that their children could learn and fairly rapidly. Many of these mothers for the first time were willing to go to school to discuss their child's progress. They also wanted to know how they could help their child. For these lower class mothers, mostly black, the fact that they could really help their non-learning children to learn resulted in continued demand for materials to continue the work with their children beyond the duration of the program. The experience that their children could learn with their help altered most of the mother-child relationships markedly. The investigators found the mothers recounting other successes of the very children with whom they had previously had only a disappointed and angry involvement.

It was clear in each instance that the mothers were more interested, more giving, and proud of their children and clearly proud of themselves for having helped their youngsters to learn. As one mother put it, "I thought Georgia (a five-year-old) was a dummy and couldn't learn, but she's smart. She learns these games great and we have more fun playing them together. I've never seen her laugh and smile so much like when we do these games." These mothers and their children not only felt differently about themselves, but they had learned how to enhance their relationship so that they were more playful and warmer. Teachers commented that these poor learners were picking up and were among the most eager and responsive

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participants in the class.

Observers in the experiment and in school commented on the attitudinal and behavioral differences of these children and their mothers. Both children and parents showed enhanced capacity to cope, at least with school and by anecdote with other situations.

Conclusion

It is reasonable to expect that many parents, if offered assistance by the schools, would help in areas where they are needed. Parents are the primary teachers of their children up to the time their children enter school. Parent effectiveness may be enhanced through training programs for parents sponsored by school personnel who gain expertise in working with parents and teaching specific subjects to parents for them to use with children who need their help. The use of parent help may be an important financial consideration, perhaps the most important that may be used to reverse the trend toward non-learning in the schools.

A variety of studies nationally have indicated success in involving parents in programs in such a way as to benefit academic achievement of their children. Ira Gordon's[6] work in Florida with infants, Earl Schaeffer's work with 15-month to three-year-old children in New York[12,13,14], Weikert's work in Ypsilanti[16], Hess and Shipmann[7], Karnes[8], Levenstein[9], and many others have indicated that work with parents leads to gains in achievement of children.

In the states of California and Washington, several programs indicate that parent involvement programs may be particularly effective.[1,2,3]

Teachers currently at the end of their ropes in essentially non-rewarding jobs, just hanging on and not being productive as teachers, will initially be threatened by parents' presence in the classroom and

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involvement with children's learning. As they experience parents as allies in relevant learning they will feel rewarded because they can once again teach and feel competent and meaningful as human beings.

In the same way parental efforts to help their child learn enhance the parent and child's feelings of being effective and competent human beings, a critical attribute of positive mental health.

Parent involvement on a nation-wide basis, as participant advocates in their child's learning can improve the achievements of the child and the mental health of children, parents, and teachers.

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